

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 02582 080554Z
ACTION OES-07

INFO OCT-01 NEA-11 ISO-00 SS-15 AID-05 EB-08 SP-02
AGRE-00 NSC-05 COME-00 OMB-01 TRSE-00 CIAE-00
INR-10 NSAE-00 H-01 IO-13 ICA-11 /090 W
-----039906 080600Z /15

R 080520Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7904

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 2582

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: SPOP, SY
SUBJECT: POPULATION GROWTH IN SYRIA

REF: STATE 107370

1. DEPUTY DIRECTOR DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY ASSAD LUTFI RECENTLY DISCUSSED WITH POLOFF QUESTION OF SYRIA'S HIGH POPULATION GROWTH AND PROBLEMS THIS POSED FOR SYRIA, NOT ONLY IN TERMS OF FOOD PRODUCTION BUT IN TERMS OF SARG'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE NECESSARY SERVICES AND A BETTER WAY OF LIFE FOR ITS CITIZENS. IN THIS REGARD FOOD IS THE LEAST OF SYRIA'S PROBLEMS, ACCORDING TO LUTFI. FIVE-YEAR PLAN FOCUSES ON AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SYRIAN AUTHORITIES ANTICIPATE SYRIA'S BECOMING A NET AGRICULTURAL EXPORTERAS THIS SECTOR ATTAINS HIGHER LEVEL OF EFFICIENCY AND NEW LAND IS BROUGHT INTO PRODUCTION. IN ADDITION, LUTFI CLAIMED, UNEMPLOYMENT IS NOT A SYRIAN PROBLEM ALTHOUGH HE DID ADMIT TO UNDEREMPLOYMENT IN SOME PUBLIC SECTORS.

2. NEVERTHELESS, LUTFI SAID, SYRIA WILL HAVE TO COME TO GRIPS WITH HIGH ANNUAL POPULATION GROWTH (EST. 3.3 PERCENT) IF ONLY BECAUSE SARG CANNOT CONTINUE TO EDUCATE AND PROVIDE SERVICES TO EVER INCREASING NUMBER OF CITIZENS. LUTFI SAID HE TREMBLED AT THOUGHT THAT SYRIA COULD ONE DAY GET INTO IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION
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PAGE 02 DAMASC 02582 080554Z

FACED BY EGYPT.

3. SYRIANS DO GET EXTRA PAY OF 25 LS PER MONTH PER CHILD, BUT THIS IS DROP IN BUCKET IN TERMS OF ACTUAL COST OF RAISING CHILDREN. THUS, LUTFI DOES NOT SEE STATE INCENTIVES FOR CHILD BIRTH AS CRITICAL PROBLEM. SOURCE OF PROBLEM IN SYRIA IS DEEPLY ROOTED CULTURAL TRADITION OF LARGE FAMILIES

IN WHICH PARENTS TAKE GREAT PRIDE AND WHICH IN SOME CASES ARE GUARANTEE FOR ECONOMIC SURVIVAL IN PARENTS OLD AGE. NO BIRTH CONTROL PROGRAM, NO MATTER HOW IT IS PACKAGED, WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON THIS CULTURAL TRADITION, LUTFI CLAIMED.

4. ANSWER, IN LUTFI'S VIEW, LIES IN EDUCATION. HE POINTED OUT THAT WHILE HE WAS ONE OF SEVEN CHILDREN, HE LIMITED HIS OWN FAMILY TO THREE. THIS WAS DIRECT RESULT OF HIS OWN EDUCATION. HE SAID THAT SAME TREND WAS PREVALENT AMONG REST OF EDUCATED MIDDLE CLASS. IN CONTRAST, HE POINTED TO MIDDLE CLASS SYRIAN OFFICIALS WHO HAD RECEIVED LIMITED FORMAL EDUCATIONAL TRAINING AND WHO FOLLOWED THEIR FATHERS' EXAMPLES OF LARGE FAMILIES. LUTFI ADMITTED THAT HIS IDEAS WERE SPECULATIVE SINCE SYRIA IS ONLY BEGINNING TO RECOGNIZE VALUE OF STATISTICAL RESEARCH IN FORMULATING POLICY. HE CONSIDERED SUCH RESEARCH IMPERATIVE TO RATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SYRIA'S DOMESTIC POLICIES. IN SUBSEQUENT CONVERSATION POLOFF HELD WITH KHADDAM'S INTERPRETER ABU FARES, HE CAME TO SAME CONCLUSION AS LUTFI--SYRIA'S ANSWER TO THE HIGH BIRTHRATE LIES IN EDUCATION BECAUSE EDUCATED SYRIANS HAVE FEWER CHILDREN. HE ADDED THAT RURAL ELECTRIFICATION MIGHT ALSO HELP BRING DOWN THE BIRTHRATE.

5. COMMENT: I HAVE DIRECTED EMBASSY STAFF TO KEEP QUESTIONS RAISED IN REFTEL IN MIND DURING THEIR DISCUSSIONS WITH SARG OFFICIALS AND TO SEEK TO ENCOURAGE SYRIAN RECOGNITION OF A CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 DAMASC 02582 080554Z

PROBLEM WHICH AT THIS POINT IS ONLY DIMLY PERCEIVED HERE. END COMMENT.

6. USAID, WHICH HAS CLOSELY MONITORED POPULATION ISSUE IN SYRIA, WILL BE PROVIDING UPDATE TO LAST SUMMARY (TOAID A-67 DATED 8/2/77) GIVING MORE DETAILS OF CURRENT SITUATION. PELLETREAU

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POPULATION GROWTH RATE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 may 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC02582
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X4
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780194-0727
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780584/aaaactkx.tel
Line Count: 101
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 9ce9b4a2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION OES
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: ONLY
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: ONLY
Reference: 78 STATE 107370
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2765301
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: POPULATION GROWTH IN SYRIA
TAGS: SPOP, SY
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/9ce9b4a2-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014